

Day 17: Popsicles by PaperBodies

Series: [Harringrove April Challenge \[9\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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Summary:

Billy tried not to hate his new town, but being in fifth grade at Hawkins Elementary was nothing like it had been back home. For one thing, his school back in San Diego had been bright and welcoming. It was made up of several buildings, spread out around a broad expanse of grass. Every classroom had wide windows, and his class spent half their time outside anyway. Hawkins Elementary was one big building, and Billy's classroom didn't have any windows at all. They ate lunch inside and only got to go outside for recess if the weather was good. Some days, Billy didn't see the sun all day. On good days, that just made Billy a little restless. On bad days, it made him feel trapped.

And then there was the fact that his old school had been big. Billy hadn't known everyone in his grade, and they hadn't known him. He had his group of friends from first grade, but he also met new people every year. Hawkins Elementary was tiny, and everyone had known just about everyone else since kindergarten. Billy got a temporary boost in popularity just from being new, but he knew it couldn't last

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When he first arrived, Tommy and Carol took him in. There was value in being friends with the new kid from California, so the three of them spent lunch and recess together, Tommy and Carol narrating a steady stream of their classmates' life stories for Billy. Sometimes, though not often enough, Steve Harrington joined them. He often told Tommy and Carol they were being too mean, but he also laughed at their commentary a lot of the time. He had a really nice laugh, and sometimes Billy wished that Steve would sit with them more often, but that just wasn't what Steve did.

Steve was friends with everyone, as far as Billy could tell. He spent his lunch and recess time drifting from group to group. He was welcome everywhere because he was nice and good at sports and had a great smile, which outweighed the fact that he was in the lowest reading group and also a complete weirdo. He was obsessed with birds, of all things, and was willing to share his bird facts at the drop of a hat. Tommy told Billy that in fourth grade Steve had been

obsessed with space, and in third grade it had been insects. Steve was sweet in a way that made Billy a little uncomfortable, mainly because he knew Neil wouldn't approve. Steve cried easily, especially after reading group, and he hated being left out of anything, so he was impossibly easy to tease. Tommy mocked Steve to his face constantly, and made fun of him behind his back all the time, but he also attacked anyone else who even looked at Steve sideways. Billy didn't understand that at all. At least, not until it all went wrong.

It started on a Tuesday. Tommy and Billy were messing around on the monkey bars while Carol was on the swings with Robin. Tommy kept glancing over at where Steve was sitting under a tree next to Barb, talking and gesticulating wildly. It had been a good week for Billy, in that he had made Steve laugh so hard that milk came out of his nose at lunch the day before. He was still coasting on the high from that victory when Tommy turned to him and looked at him speculatively.

"You know, Steve said some stuff about your mom," Tommy said casually. Billy just stared at him for a long moment, feeling a flush of red creep up his neck and face. His mom was a sensitive subject. She was beautiful and she loved the beach and some of Billy's happiest memories were days spent with her, but she could also be a little... unpredictable. There had been an incident, a week or so before, when she had come to pick up Billy in a pair of paint-splattered overalls and no shoes. She had dragged him out to the field, where she insisted that they sprawl out on their backs and watch the clouds for a while before they went home. Billy usually loved doing that, but he was painfully aware of the presence of his classmates and teachers, and he could feel eyes on them as his mom spun in circles, her eyes on the sky, before she finally agreed to drive home. Since then, Billy knew that there had been gossip about how his mom was a little weird. Still, that didn't sound like Steve.

"Really?" Billy asked, because as far as he knew, Steve didn't gossip about anybody. He was too nice for that. Tommy shrugged.

"Yeah," he said. "Nothing too mean, obviously, but he apparently told Carol that it must be hard for you, with your mom being a little, you know." Tommy circled his finger around his temple to indicate that she was crazy. Billy felt shame and anger rising up in him in

equal measure. "If it bothers you," Tommy said carefully, "you could always say something about how Steve is dumb. I mean, he can barely even read. Have you seen his face after reading group? He's such a crybaby." Tommy was snickering. Billy *had* seen Steve's face after reading group, with his red-rimmed eyes and the defeated turn of his mouth. It would be awful to say something about that. But, Billy reminded himself, Steve had talked about his *mom*, so he had technically started it.

Billy went home and brooded about it all evening, watching his mom as she hummed to herself in the kitchen, and he finally decided that he had to say something to Steve. His mother's honor was at stake, after all. He showed up to school on Wednesday bleary-eyed and tense, feeling more off-balance than he had since he had arrived in Hawkins. He approached Steve at recess, and he was so agitated that he didn't even think to wonder why they had such a big audience.

"Hey," Billy said to Steve, a little aggressively, "I heard what you said about my mom." Steve's brow furrowed, and Billy assumed he hadn't expected to get caught. He pressed on. "You shouldn't say things about other people when..." He paused there, just for a moment. There probably wasn't any coming back from the next part. But then he remembered his mom's soft, sweet voice humming for him when she tucked him into bed every night, and he swallowed hard and continued. "When you're too dumb to read," Billy finished, eyes burning with unshed tears. Steve's eyes went wide. The hurt in them was unmistakable, but he didn't cry, and somehow that was worse. He just stiffened for a minute and then looked down at his feet, shoulders hunching like he was trying to be smaller.

Billy looked over at Tommy, and discovered that he had a faint smile on his face. Barb looked horrified, and Nancy looked furious, and Carol looked uncertain, but Tommy was smiling. Billy suddenly felt like the ground was shifting under his feet. Like he wasn't understanding something important. He looked back at Steve, and saw that he had his arms wrapped around himself protectively. Billy felt something in his chest crumble, and he stalked off across the blacktop. He spent the rest of recess hunched against the wall, staring at nothing.

He approached Steve two days later. They had been difficult days.

Nancy had glared at him every time she saw him, and Barb had approached him multiple times, demanding an explanation. Carol kept glancing over, looking away when she saw Billy looking back. Tommy smirked at him every time they made eye contact, and Steve kept his eyes firmly on the ground. He didn't make eye contact with Billy or anyone else, and Billy felt like a monster. He wasn't sure how to fix it, but he knew he had to try.

He waited until Friday afternoon, when they had all been released from class with celebratory double popsicles to run around on the blacktop in the forty minutes remaining before spring break. Billy found Steve under his usual tree, sitting with his knees pulled up to his chest, an orange popsicle in his hand, still wrapped. Billy sat down next to Steve, and was pleased when he didn't immediately leave.

"Do you want half of my popsicle?" Billy asked, instead of apologizing. Steve looked at him for a long moment and then nodded. He didn't smile.

"Sure?" he said, and it sounded like a question. Billy broke it off and handed it over. What he didn't expect was for Steve to break his popsicle in half as well, and hold out one half for Billy. "It's the best way to do it," Steve explained. "This way we both get to have both flavors." Billy wanted to argue that it didn't work that way, that it wasn't an apology if they just traded, but Steve's face was determined. Billy stared at him and then tentatively reached out. Steve handed him the popsicle and their fingers brushed briefly. Billy looked away.

They enjoyed their popsicles in silence for a while, until they were holding two sticks each and had sticky popsicle residue on their hands and faces.

"I'm sorry," Billy finally said quietly. It was easier to get the words out than he had expected. He wondered, briefly, why his dad seemed to find it so difficult. "I'm sorry I said those things to you." Steve smiled a little, but it was sad.

"It's okay," he said. "You just said what everyone else was thinking."

"No, Steve," Billy said. For some reason, it was important to him that Steve understand this. "People don't think that. *I* don't think that. I was just being mean. Tommy said..." he trailed off as the pieces fell into place in his head. Tommy was the one who told him that Steve had made fun of his mom. Tommy was the one who insisted that Billy had to stand up for himself, had to fight back. Tommy had suggested that he aim for Steve's most visible weakness. And Tommy had been pleased when Billy had lashed out; Billy remembered his satisfied smile.

Billy looked around, confident of what he would find, and he was right: Tommy was on the swings, eyes on Billy and Steve and mouth set in a frown. When he saw Billy watching, he looked away, over at Carol on the swing next to him. Billy waited, and smiled a little to himself when he saw Tommy glance back over and scowl. Billy still didn't fully understand Tommy's friendship with Steve, but he was starting to see the edges of it.

"Tommy said what?" Steve asked, curious, but Billy shook his head. "Nothing, It doesn't matter." He turned to look at Steve. "You're not dumb, Steve," he said firmly. "You're good at a lot of different things."

"Thanks, Billy," Steve said sincerely, and Billy smiled. Steve smiled back, his mouth red from Billy's popsicle. This time, his smile was full and genuine, and Billy thought that maybe he didn't hate *everything* about Hawkins Elementary.

Eight years and two months later

Steve's graduation party was in full swing. The kids were splashing around in the pool and Billy was stretched out on a lounge chair, full of burgers and chips. Steve flopped down in the chair next to him, two double popsicles in his hands. He handed one to Billy and then unwrapped his own. He casually snapped the popsicle in two and held half of it out to Billy. He wasn't even really paying attention—he was smiling over at Robin, who had followed him out of the house and was in the middle of a story. Billy took the offered popsicle and handed the other half of his back to Steve. He waited for Robin to

finish her story and head back for more snacks before he said anything. Just for fun, he also waited until he saw Tommy watching from across the pool to lean in close to Steve, his mouth right next to Steve's ear.

"I love you," he whispered in Steve's ear. Steve had the same reaction he always did—his cheeks flushed a delightful pink and his eyes softened as he looked at Billy.

"What was that for?" he murmured as he finished his cherry popsicle and started in on the lime one Billy had handed him.

"Nothing specific," Billy lied. "Can't I just tell my boyfriend I love him? Why do I have to have a reason?" Steve narrowed his eyes and stared at Billy for a long moment.

"This is about the popsicles, isn't it?" he finally asked. Billy flushed and opened his mouth to ask Steve how he could possibly have known that, but Steve beat him to it. He leaned in and dropped a quick kiss behind Billy's ear. It was too brief for anyone to have noticed, probably. Besides, Billy cared less about that than he used to. He told Neil to go fuck himself on the day he turned eighteen, and he hadn't looked back. "I'm not dumb, remember?" Steve whispered into his ear, and Billy felt warm all over. He settled back in his chair with his popsicle and reflected that while he and Steve would probably leave Hawkins at some point, Billy didn't really hate it here at all. Not anymore.

Author's Note:

I wrote two completely different fics for today because the first one sucked! You're welcome.

Also, baby Barb is maybe my favorite. And I cut this because I took out the section that made it relevant, but baby Heather and baby Billy are absolutely friends because Heather took one look at him on his first day and went, "Finally, someone who knows how to put together an outfit!" 🥰